

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION TO RELIEVE THE NURSING SHORTAGE

THE nurse shortage in this country is a matter dating back to many years before World War II. It will undoubtedly become aggravated as more and more nurses are absorbed into the armed forces. The Committee on Public Health Relations of The Academy has given close attention to this problem and has issued various recommendations designed to alleviate the crisis. The Committee has emphasized especially the importance of enlarging the role of practical nurses in the care of the sick and has supported efforts to improve the quality of their training.

Within recent months the Interdepartmental Health Council of New York State, representing the State Departments of Health, Mental Hygiene, Social Welfare and Education, has promulgated, through an Advisory Committee on Nursing Service, a set of proposals for the organization of nursing education and service. These proposals embody changes that have aroused deep concern on the part of practicing physicians and hospital administrators. Since neither of these groups was represented on the committee that formulated the report, the Committee on Public Health Relations examined the proposals from these points of view.

The Interdepartmental Health Council proposes that only two types of nurses be recognized: 1) diploma nurses, licensed after two years of training in technical courses, and 2) college degree nurses, prepared in a four-year course and eligible for graduate training to fill positions as educators, supervisors and administrators. It is suggested that degree nurses be used to provide nursing care in complicated clinical situations and "to act as team captains for planning and directing and giving personal nursing care to individuals and groups, and to fill first level public health positions." To carry out the nontechnical duties associated with nursing care, the Council proposes "nursing aides" trained either on the job or in special courses in secondary schools. Aides might receive certificates but would not be licensed.

The proposals make no provision for practical nurses. They suggest instead that the training courses for practical nurses be merged with the standard three-year nursing course to produce in two years the "diploma

nurse." They recommend that high school graduation be required of all candidates for nurse training. The Academy Committee is of the opinion that such a requirement would eliminate many older women who have not graduated from high school as well as many younger women who would make competent practical nurses.

A further radical change suggested in the proposals is the transfer of all basic training from hospitals to academic institutions. Diploma nurses would be trained in "postsecondary" schools, such as technical institutes, junior and community colleges, while degree nurses would take their work in institutions of higher education.

While the presentation of basic training for nurses in schools and colleges rather than hospitals may have advantages, the Committee wishes to point out that hospital schools of nursing have for many years turned out competent nurses and that no evidence has been offered to show that they are not still doing so. Although some schools are not up to the highest standards, this is no reason for discontinuing all of them. Furthermore, the Committee is unable to accept the Council's theory that placing the training of nurses in academic institutions would strengthen the appeal of nursing as a career; the opportunity for service still exerts an influence upon the choice of nursing as a vocation. The Joint Committee on Nursing Education and Service of the Greater New York Hospital Association and the Hospital Association of New York State is of the opinion that hospital schools can adjust their curricula wherever necessary and that they can adequately train nurses in two years without radical changes or very expensive additions. If experimental programs are to be set up, hospital schools should participate in them.

To implement the suggested schemes of education, the State Interdepartmental Health Council makes a number of proposals for action. First, it urges the provision of governmental subsidies to pay for the training of nurses. It recommends amendment of the Nurse Practice Act to delete the present requirement that all nurses applying for licensure be 20 years of age. At present young women entering upon nurse training, when they graduate from high school are in many instances, particularly in the case of practical nurses, still under the age limit for licensure when they complete their studies and are thus unable to begin the practice of their vocation, sometimes for more than a year.

Other proposals relate to demonstration programs for the training in appropriate educational institutions of the three types of nursing

personnel—diploma nurses, degree nurses and nursing aides; to analysis and evaluation of the various factors in nursing service, and to the improvement of nursing care through official and voluntary public health nursing services.

The Committee recognizes that these are long-range proposals and takes cognizance of the Council's statement that the proposed plans would "affect neither the status of those nurses now in practice nor the existing pattern of nurse education during the experimental and developmental stages, which period may require considerable time." Long-range planning and experimentation to resolve the problem are desirable, but something has to be done to meet the present critical situation. It is therefore the opinion of The New York Academy of Medicine that steps should be initiated by the State Department of Education, with the aid of local bodies, to plan a legislative and administrative program for early action. The Committee submitted to the State Commissioner of Education a statement of points to be considered in conjunction with such a program:

1. The age at which young women may enter upon active nurse practice should by legislative act be reduced from 20 to 18.
2. Nurses not licensed in this State should be permitted by legislative act to serve on the nursing staffs of hospitals under supervision in the same manner as interns are now permitted to serve before they are licensed to practice.
3. The training of practical nurses should be continued, and any effort to abolish such training should be vigorously opposed. The schools for practical nursing should be developed to fulfill the need for competent people to take care of patients with nonacute conditions and to provide for the care of those with long-drawn-out maladies or in the convalescent stage of illness. The practical nurse has established a secure place for herself in the care of the sick, both in their homes and in the hospitals.
4. The Academy stands opposed to the proposal that all candidates for nurse training should be high school graduates. Such a requirement would automatically eliminate some of the most valuable sources of practical nurse power, young or middle-aged women with a talent for nursing, who have not finished high school. Many capable women, who for some reason have not completed an academic high school course, are well able as practical nurses to give simple care to the sick under the supervision

of a physician or a graduate nurse. This reservoir of potential nursing service must not be ignored—the country needs all the nurses that can be mustered.

5. Changes in procedure are recommended, to permit that all necessary instruction in nursing be completed within the statutory two years and that the third year be devoted, as it were, to an internship on a salary basis. This would make available to the hospitals a great deal of the time of the third year, which now includes class work.

6. All training schools should be alerted to the possibility that a two-year course may supersede the present course and should be requested to make the necessary adjustments in their curricula.

7. Every effort should be made to stimulate nurse recruitment. The proposed reduction of the course from three to two years, with the opportunity for those who so desire to obtain additional specialized instruction in clinical or administrative phases of nursing at educational institutions, will appeal to young women who are responding to nursing as a vocation, first, because of the opportunity it offers for service, and secondly, because of the educational status it affords for those who elect a degree in nursing. Every resource for adequate training of nurses should be availed of. Joint nurse-training programs for hospitals of a given region, if they desire to participate, should be encouraged.

The Commissioner of Education responded to this communication with an expression of appreciation for the serious consideration given to the problem by the Committee on Public Health Relations. He stated that the Department of Education is already creating experimental programs for the study of the proposed course and informed the Committee that the suggestion for internships in nursing is under consideration. With respect to the position of the practical nurse, the Commissioner made the following statement: "Irrespective of any adjustment that may take place in the nursing profession, it is clear that we must provide for a type of nursing service that is on a different level from that provided by the registered nurse."

The time for leisurely discussion is past. Those responsible for administrative changes in nursing education should make the necessary preparations to act without delay in this emergency.

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* Recommendations approved by the Committee on Public Health Relations, May 7, 1951.